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# Assessment and mapping of the shallow geothermal potential in the province of Cuneo (Piedmont, NW Italy)

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## Abstract

Ground Source Heat Pump (GSHP) is a low carbon heating and cooling technology which can make an important contribution for reaching the ambitious CO<sub>2</sub> reduction targets set by the European Union. The economic and technical suitability of this technology strongly depends on the thermal and hydrogeological properties of the ground at the installation site, which need to be assessed in detail. A common indicator adopted to define such suitability is the geothermal potential, i.e. the thermal power that can be exchanged with the ground through a GSHP with a certain setup. In this paper, we present the assessment and mapping of the shallow geothermal potential in the province of Cuneo, a 6,900 km<sup>2</sup> wide county in NW Italy. Geological, hydrogeological and climatic information are collected and processed to estimate the relevant ground properties. The shallow geothermal potential is then estimated with different methods for closed-loop installations (Borehole Heat Exchangers, BHEs) and open-loop installations (Ground Water Heat Pumps, GWHPs) systems in order to identify the most suitable areas for different technologies. The maps of the geothermal potential are an important planning tool for the installation of GSHPs and for the growth of this renewable energy source.

**Keywords:** geothermal potential; Ground Source Heat Pump; Borehole Heat Exchanger; Ground Water Heat Pump; Cuneo; heat pump

## 1 Introduction

The European Union recently set three ambitious objectives for its energy policies: by the year 2020, the total energy consumption and the Greenhouse Gas emission have to be cut by 20%, and 20% of the total

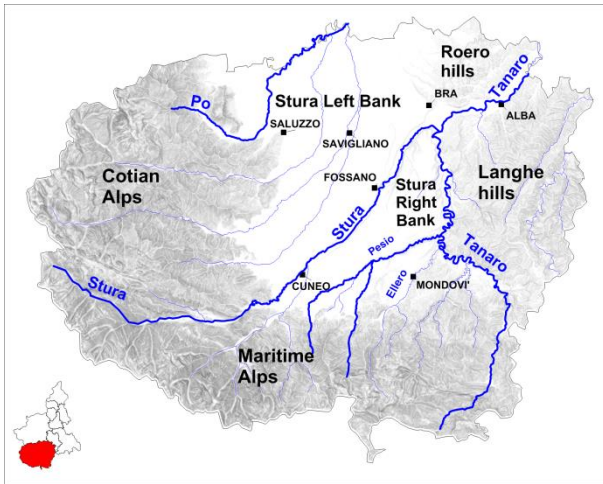
energy consumption should be covered by Renewable Energy Sources (RES) [1]. Italy has already achieved its national target in 2014, with 38.6% of the electricity and 18% of the heat production provided by RES [2], one of the best performances among EU Member States [1]. To achieve further improvements in alignment with Roadmap 2050 [3], efforts should now concentrate on heat production, for which the most adopted RES are ligneous biomass (68.9%) and heat pumps (25.8%) [2]. A further expansion of biomass heating is hardly sustainable, due to its impact on air quality [4, 5]. On the other hand, heat pumps have zero emissions on site and reduce GHG emissions up to 90% compared to fossil fuel burners, depending on the energy mix adopted for the production of electricity [6, 7]. In Italy, about 60% of the total production of electricity is covered by fossil fuels, with an emission factor of 326.8 g CO<sub>2</sub>/kWh [8]; the consequent reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> production, according to Saner et al. [7], is of about 50% compared to a methane boiler. Heat pumps are divided into two main categories: Air Source (ASHP) and Ground Source (GSHP). The main advantage of GSHPs compared to ASHPs is the higher COP, thanks to the lower temperature difference between the heat source (ground or groundwater) and sink (heating/cooling terminals) [9]. GSHPs have proved to be a cost-effective solution for a wide range of buildings, despite the additional expense for the installation of the ground heat exchangers . GSHPs in Italy still account for only 0.1% of the total thermal energy production [2]. However, a continuously increasing trend has been observed in recent years (+13% in 2013), and a strong rise is expected for the next 10-15 years [10, 11]. The high cost of installation is widely acknowledged as a limiting factor for the increase of heat pump installations and, particularly, for geothermal heat pumps. In Italy, another major barrier is the high cost of electricity for domestic supply, compared to the relatively low cost of methane [12]. As a consequence, compared to other countries, a lower saving margin is achieved for heat pumps against fossil-fuelled boilers. The problem of the higher cost of installation has been addressed introducing a strong tax refund (65%) on energy retrofit works of existing buildings, among which GSHPs are included [13]. The lack of homogeneous and targeted regulation is another barrier for the growth of shallow geothermal energy in Italy [14]. This absence of regulation has been partially filled with voluntary schemes and standardization [15], such as the recent UNI standards for GSHPs [16-18]. A final problem is that the technology and the potential of shallow geothermal energy are still little known in most EU countries. A number of EU-funded projects have been conducted in recent years to disseminate knowledge on GSHPs with training events, workshops, and case studies [19-21]. These projects raised the different stakeholders' awareness of the potential applications of shallow geothermal energy. However, the suitability of different territories for GSHPs needs to be studied on the small scale, since it depends on site-specific parameters and on the technology adopted [22-24]. A commonly adopted indicator is geothermal potential, which is defined in different ways, but can generally be identified as the

capacity of the ground/aquifer to provide heating and/or cooling [25-31]. Some projects have already been conducted in Italy to assess shallow geothermal potential. Busoni et al. [26] assessed and mapped the suitability for the installation of BHEs of the province of Treviso (Veneto, NE Italy). Their work took into account ground thermal conductivity, geothermal gradient and groundwater velocity. The VIGOR project [28, 29] addressed both shallow and deep geothermal energy potentials of four regions in Southern Italy (Campania, Apulia, Calabria and Sicily). In situ measurements of the thermal conductivity of rocks [28] were conducted over the mapped territory, and the potential for GSHPs was mapped for both heating and cooling purposes [29]. Gemelli et al. (2011, [30]) assessed the shallow geothermal potential of the Marche region (Central Italy), evaluating the required BHE length to cover a standard thermal load. Fewer studies have been performed for open loop Ground Water Heat Pumps (GWHPs), such as the works of Arola et al. in Finland [25]. Lo Russo and Civita provide an overview of the hydrodynamic properties of shallow unconfined aquifers in Piedmont (NW Italy) [31].

The aforementioned studies provide a methodological basis for the work presented in this paper. Here, the shallow geothermal potential in the province of Cuneo (Piedmont, NW Italy) is assessed and mapped. The geological and hydrogeological setting of this territory is studied, and a conceptual model is provided to correlate this setting with ground thermal parameters. These are the input for the estimation of the closed-loop geothermal potential with model G.POT [27]. The geothermal potential for open-loop systems was evaluated by estimating the maximum extractable and injectable flow rates of the shallow aquifers of the Cuneo plain, based on a dataset of well tests results. Conclusions are drawn on the suitability of different areas of the province of Cuneo for closed and open loop geothermal heat pumps.

## 2 The territory surveyed

The province of Cuneo is a 6,900 km<sup>2</sup> wide area located in the south-western edge of Piedmont. It can be subdivided into three main parts (Fig. 1): the Alpine valleys (Cotian and Maritime Alps) on the western and southern edges, covering about 51% of the total surface, the plain in the centre of the Province (22%) and the hills of Langhe and Roero in the East part (27%).



**Fig. 1 – Map of the province of Cuneo. Scale: 1:1,500,000.**

The total population is 592,060 inhabitants, of which 35% live in the county seat Cuneo (56,113 inhabitants) and 6 other main towns in the plain (Alba, Bra, Fossano, Mondovì, Savigliano and Saluzzo) of 15,000 to 30,000 inhabitants. The rest of the population mostly lives in rural villages on the plain, while a small part lives in the mountains and the hills.

In this chapter, the province of Cuneo is described from the climatic, geologic and hydrogeological points of view, and data is provided for the assessment of the shallow geothermal potential.

## 2.1 Climate

Cuneo is characterized by a continental climate with a cold winter and a mild summer, as reported in Fig. 2A. Although the distance from the sea is quite short (30÷100 km), a weak influence of the Mediterranean sea is observed, due to the isolating effect of the Alpine chain. The total rainfall varies widely, from 700÷900 mm/y in the hills of Langhe and Roero to 900÷1200 mm/y in the plain and in the mountains [32]. The annual mean air temperature is strongly correlated with the ground elevation, as shown in Fig. 2B, ranging from -3.1°C to +13.2°C [33]. The climate of Cuneo and its province is therefore one of the coldest in Italy, thus influencing the distribution of the heating degree-days (Italian DPR 412/1993 [34]). 66% of the population lives in climate zone E (2400÷3000 heating DD) and 34% lives in climate zone F (>3000 DD). As a consequence, the expense for house heating is one of the highest in Italy, while almost 90% of homes have no chilling plant [35].

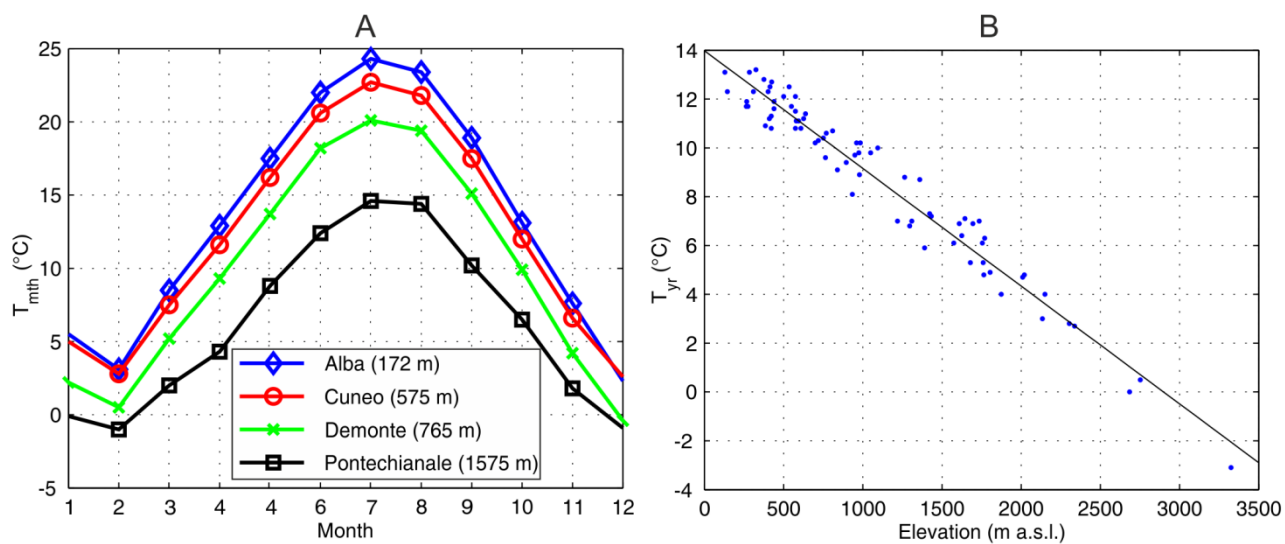


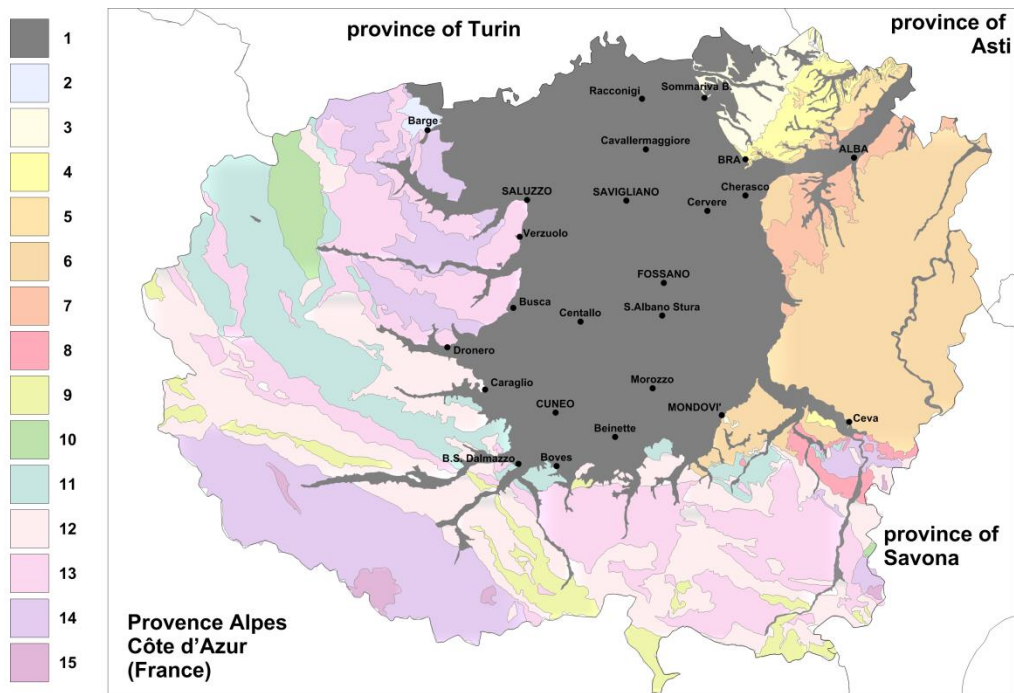
Fig. 2 – Climate of the province of Cuneo: (A) monthly mean temperatures in different locations; (B) correlation between elevation and mean annual air temperature.

## 2.2 Geology

The mountainous portion of the territory surveyed is located on the boundary between the Helvetic and the Penninic domains of the Alps [36] and, according to the geological map of Piedmont [37] reported in Fig. 3, it is mainly composed of gneiss, and, to a lesser extent, limestone, calceschysts, serpentinites, sedimentary rocks (conglomerates, sandstone, gypsum, consolidated clays) and granite.

The plain is composed of locally cemented sand and gravel sediments deposited in the Holocene (12000 years BP), with small loamy and clayey lenses. This alluvial cover lies on the Tertiary Piedmont Basin, composed of marine sediments settled during the Pliocene and the Villafranchian (5÷1 Ma BP) [31, 38].

The East part of the province of Cuneo is occupied by the hills of the Langhe, on the right bank of the Tanaro river, and of Roero, on the left bank. These hills were formed by the local uplifting of the Tertiary Piedmont Basin (Langhian, 16÷13 Ma BP) [39] and the excavated by the tributaries of the Tanaro river after the capture of this watercourse, occurred in the Riss-Wurm interglacial period (250,000 years BP). Langhe hills are mainly composed of Miocene marls and sandstones (23÷5 Ma BP), while Roero hills are composed of fine sands and clays deposited during the Pliocene (5÷2.5 Ma BP).



LEGEND OF LITHOLOGIES: 1) Alluvial sediments (Quaternary); 2) Moraines (Pleistocene); 3) Clays (Villafranchian); 4) Fine sands (Astian); 5) Clays and clayey marls (upper Miocene - medium Pliocene); 6) Marls (medium Miocene); 7) Marls and siltstones (upper Oligocene-medium Miocene); 8) Sandstone (Oligocene); 9) Alternated clayey layers (Cretaceous-Eocene); 10) Serpentinites of the Piedmontese zone (Jurassic-Cretaceous); 11) Calceschysts of the Piedmontese zone (Jurassic-Cretaceous); 12) Limestones and dolomies (Mesozoic); 13) Fine-grained gneiss of the Dora-Maira Massif (Permian); 14) Coarse-grained gneiss of Monte Rosa and Val d'Ossola (Permian); 15) Granites (Permian)

Fig. 3 – Geological map of the province of Cuneo (adapted from ARPA Piemonte [40]). Scale: 1:1,000,000.

## 130 2.3 Hydrogeology

131 The capture of Tanaro affected not only the morphology of a large part of the territory surveyed, but also  
132 the underground water circulation. Indeed, the deepening of the river bed of Tanaro's tributaries  
133 transformed them into hydraulic divides of the alluvial unconfined aquifer, which is composed of three  
134 main portions [32] (Fig. 4): the *Left Stura Bank* and the *Right Stura Bank*, separated by the river Stura, and  
135 the *Tanaro Valley* along the river.

136 The *Left Stura Bank* is a large aquifer (1117 km<sup>2</sup>) in the Western sector of the plain. The subsurface flow is  
137 directed from SW to NNE (Fig. 4A,) and the hydraulic gradient gradually diminishes from 10‰ on the West  
138 and South edges to 2‰ in the North part of the plain. The transmissivity is very high (up to 0.1 m<sup>2</sup>s<sup>-1</sup>) in the  
139 centre and diminishes on the eastern edge, with a concurrent reduction of the saturated thickness (Fig. 4B)  
140 of the aquifer [31]. The depth to water table (Fig. 4A) is below 10 m in the central part of the plain, while  
141 higher values close to the East and West boundaries, up to 70 m in the South-Western portion.

142 The *Right Stura Bank* aquifer (523.5 km<sup>2</sup>) is divided into a number of sub-sectors due to the influence of the  
143 creeks Pesio, Ellero and other smaller water courses [38]. On a narrow strip along the Stura river, the  
144 average transmissivity is quite high ( $5 \cdot 10^{-3} \div 5 \cdot 10^{-2}$  m<sup>2</sup>s<sup>-1</sup>) [31], while in the rest of this area is much lower  
145 ( $< 10^{-3}$  m<sup>2</sup>s<sup>-1</sup>). The saturated thickness is about 50 m in the SW portion along the Stura and it decreases to  
146 5÷10 m elsewhere, with a sharp transition; a similar trend is observed for the depth to water table.

147 The narrow aquifer of *Tanaro Valley* is scarcely productive [32] and, together with the other small aquifers  
148 located in the valleys and on the Langhe and Roero hills, it is not considered in the analysis of the open-loop  
149 geothermal potential.

## 150 3 Shallow geothermal potential

151 The spatial distributions of thermal and hydrogeological parameters, reported and described in the  
152 previous chapter, were used to assess the techno-economic feasibility of shallow geothermal systems in  
153 different parts of the province of Cuneo. The geothermal potential has different definitions depending on  
154 the technology adopted, i.e. closed-loop (BHE) or open-loop (GWHP).

155 For closed-loop systems it is defined, according to G.POT [27], as the yearly average thermal load that can  
156 be exchanged with the ground by a BHE with a length  $L$ , coping with a minimum/maximum temperature  
157 threshold of the heat carrier fluid. A limit is therefore imposed to the thermal alteration of the heat carrier  
158 fluid, which mostly depends on the thermal parameters of the ground and, to a lesser extent, on the  
159 characteristics of the BHE itself [22].

160 On the other hand, heat transport in GWHPs mostly depends on the hydrodynamic parameters of the  
161 aquifer, while thermal conductivity has a minor impact on the heat diffusion into the aquifer [41]. The  
162 efficiency of these systems can be impaired by thermal recycling, which should be considered in the design



163 phase using analytical or numerical models [24, 42]. Another important aspect of the design of GWHPs is  
164 the propagation of thermal plumes downstream the injection well, with a negative impact on drinking  
165 water wells or other geothermal installations. These issues are more likely in large cities with a high density  
166 of GWHPs [43, 44], rather than in a scarcely populated territory such as the province of Cuneo. Both the  
167 issues of thermal recycling and thermal plume interference should be evaluated with consideration to  
168 specific plants and setups, and hence a large-scale assessment is not feasible. On the other hand, the  
169 alteration of hydraulic heads due to water extraction and injection mainly depends on the aquifer's  
170 properties. A point-wise evaluation was therefore performed, based on available data on the hydrodynamic  
171 parameters of the unconfined aquifers. The maximum flow rate to be sustainably abstracted and injected  
172 was estimated and, from this value, the peak thermal power was derived. Differently from G.POT, the  
173 evaluation of open-loop geothermal potential did not consider a thermal load profile, but a peak value.  
174 Indeed, the evaluation of time-varying thermal loads would require complex and time-consuming  
175 numerical simulations for each point reported on the map, which is not feasible at this scale.  
176 The considerations reported above are the conceptual basis for the assessment and mapping of the  
177 geothermal potential for BHEs and GWHPs, which is described in this chapter.  
178

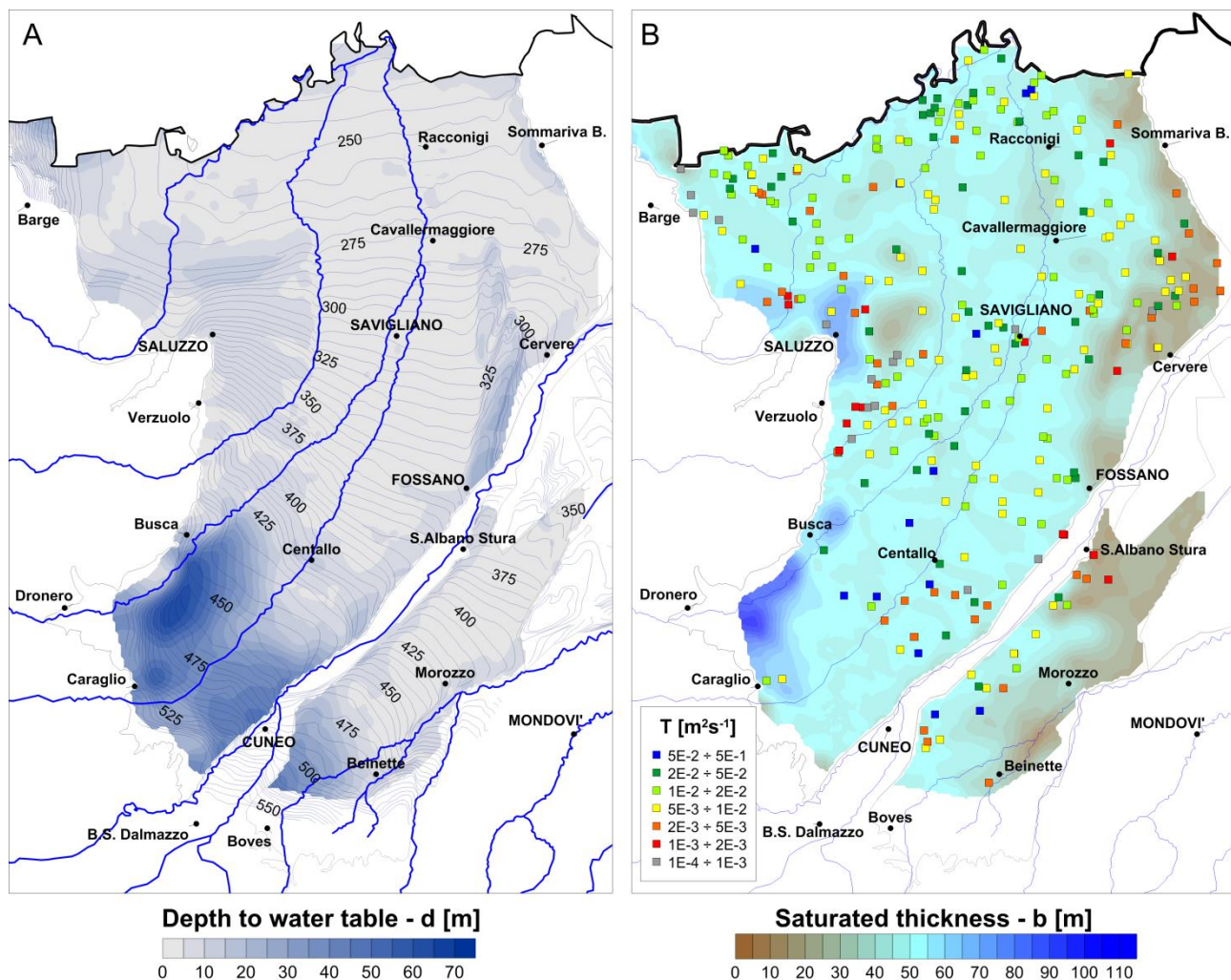


Fig. 4 – Maps of the hydrogeological parameters of the unconfined aquifers of Left Stura Bank and Right Stura Bank: (A) hydraulic heads and depth to water table; (B) transmissivity and saturated thickness. Scale 1:500,000.

### 3.1 Closed-loop geothermal potential

Closed-loop geothermal heat pumps can be installed virtually everywhere, since they do not require the abstraction of groundwater. However, the techno-economic feasibility of these systems varies substantially depending on a wide range of factors, namely:

- usage profile: the GSHP can be used in heating or cooling mode, or for both purposes in different proportions, depending on the building type (i.e. residential, commercial, public building...) and on the climate;
- thermal properties of the ground: thermal conductivity ( $\lambda$ ), thermal capacity ( $\rho c$ ), undisturbed ground temperature ( $T_0$ );
- BHE and plant properties: length ( $L$ ), minimum/maximum threshold fluid temperature ( $T_{lim}$ ) and thermal resistance ( $R_b$ ). The value of  $R_b$  is function of the geometry (borehole radius  $r_b$ , pipe

radius  $r_p$ , number of U-pipes  $n$ ) and of the thermal conductivity of the backfilling (geothermal grout  $\lambda_{bf}$ ).

Based on the aforementioned parameters, the closed-loop shallow geothermal potential  $\bar{P}_{BHE}$  (MWh/y) was estimated with the G.POT method [27]:

$$\bar{P}_{BHE} = \frac{0.0701 \cdot (T_0 - T_{lim}) \cdot \lambda \cdot L \cdot t'_c}{G_{max}(u'_s, u'_c, t'_c) + 4\pi\lambda \cdot R_b}$$

Eq. 1

where  $T_0$  (°C) is the undisturbed ground temperature,  $T_{lim}$  (°C) is the threshold minimum fluid temperature,  $\lambda$  (Wm<sup>-1</sup>K<sup>-1</sup>) is the ground thermal conductivity,  $L$  (m) is the borehole depth, and  $R_b$  (mKW<sup>-1</sup>) is the borehole thermal resistance.  $G_{max}(u'_s, u'_c, t'_c)$  is function of three non-dimensional parameters  $t'_c$ ,  $u'_c$  and  $u'_s$ :

$$G_{max}(u'_s, u'_c, t'_c) = -0.619 \cdot t'_c \cdot \log(u'_s) + (0.532 \cdot t'_c - 0.962) \cdot \log(u'_c) - 0.455 \cdot t'_c - 1.619$$

Eq. 2

with:

$$t'_c = t_c/t_y$$

Eq. 3

$$u'_c = \rho c \cdot r_b^2 / (4\lambda t_c)$$

Eq. 4

$$u'_s = \rho c \cdot r_b^2 / (4\lambda t_s)$$

Eq. 5

where  $t_c$  (s) is the length of the heating season (set to 183 days), and  $t_y$  is the length of the year;  $\rho c$  (Jm<sup>-3</sup>K<sup>-1</sup>) is the thermal capacity of the ground;  $t_s$  (s) is the simulated lifetime of the plant (set to 50 years). The G.POT method is implemented in an electronic spreadsheet available at <http://goo.gl/Pm93JT>.

An only-heating usage profile was set, as most of residential buildings in Piedmont do not have a chilling plant [35]. This is a conservative assumption, since the operation in cooling mode during summer would partially compensate the heat extraction during winter, and hence reduce the thermal drift of the ground. The thermal load has a sinusoidal trend and a typical duration of the heating season has been chosen, from October 15<sup>th</sup> to April 15<sup>th</sup> (183 days), as foreseen by DPR 412/93 for the climate zone “E” [34]. A typical double-U pipe BHE (Tab. 1) was considered, with a length  $L = 100m$ . The thermal properties of the ground were therefore evaluated on the same depth.

**Tab. 1 – Geometrical and physical properties of the BHE adopted for the geothermal potential analysis.**

Parameter	Symbol	Value
Borehole length	$L$	100 m
Borehole radius	$r_b$	0.075 m

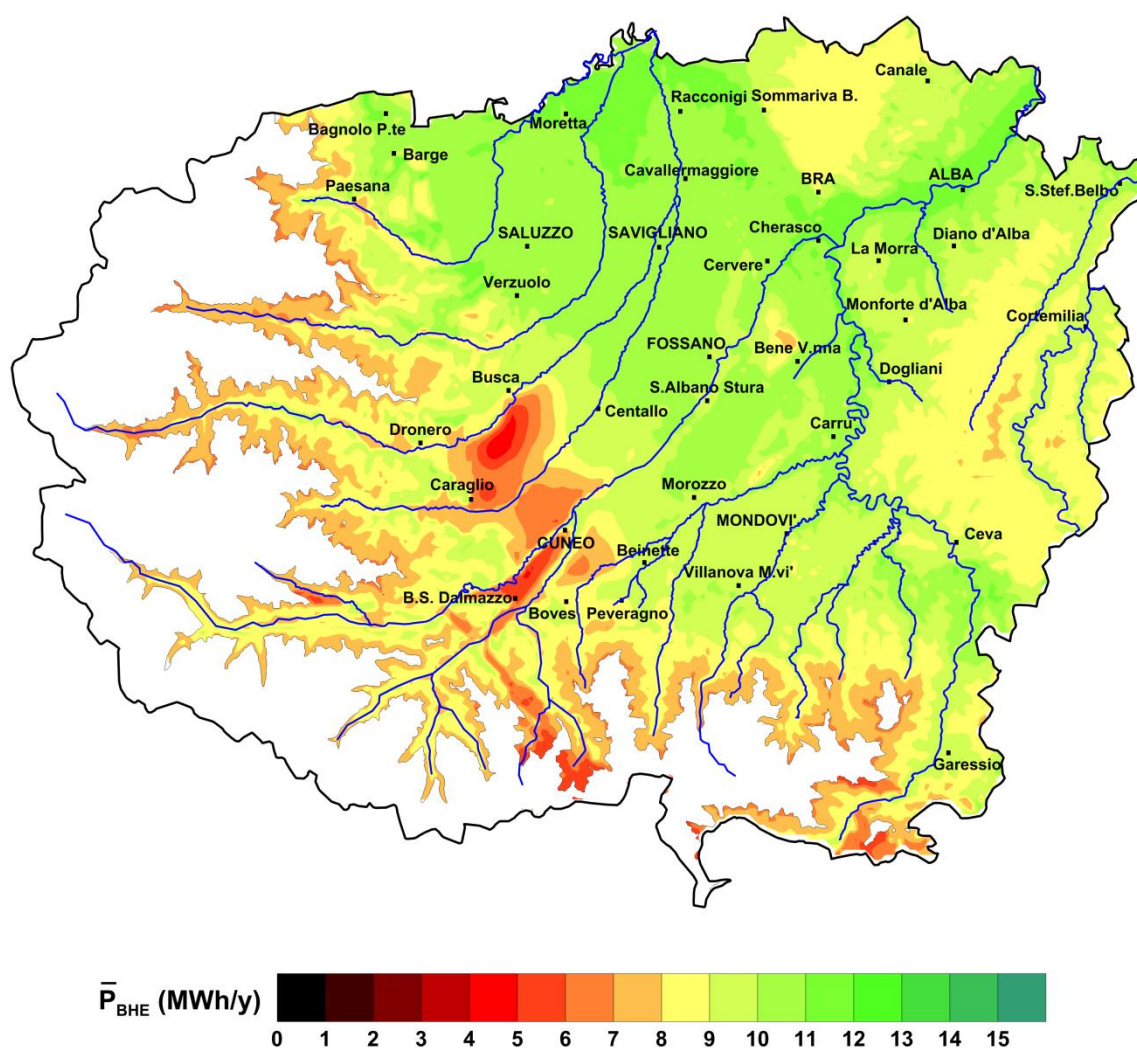
Pipe radius	$r_p$	0.016 m
Pipe number	$n$	4 (2-U pipe)
Thermal conductivity of backfilling	$\lambda_{bf}$	$2 \text{ Wm}^{-1}\text{K}^{-1}$

220

221 For thermal conductivity and thermal capacity, two different approaches were adopted:

- 222 - homogeneous values were adopted for compact rocks, both metamorphic (gneiss, serpentinite)  
 223 and sedimentary (marls, sandstones, limestones);  
 224 - a depth-averaged value has been chosen for alluvial aquifers in the plain, considering the different  
 225 thermal conductivity of the vadose and the saturated zone (see Tab. 2). The depth to water table  
 226 was used to determine the thickness of these two layers.

227 The maps of ground thermal conductivity and capacity are reported in the Supporting Information.



228

229 Fig. 5 – Map of the closed-loop geothermal potential calculated with the G.POT method [27]. Scale 1:750,000.

230

231

232

233 **Tab. 2 – Values of thermal conductivity and thermal capacity adopted for different lithologies (elaboration on data from [28, 45].**

N°	Lithology	$\lambda$ [ $Wm^{-1}K^{-1}$ ]	$\rho c$ [ $10^6 Jm^{-3}K^{-1}$ ]
1, 2	Alluvial/moraine sediments (dry)	2.4	1.5
1, 2	Alluvial/moraine sediments (saturated)	0.5	2.4
3, 9	Clay/Alternated clayey layers	1.8	2.5
4	Fine sand	1.8	2.5
5	Clay and clayey marl	2.1	2.25
6	Marl	2.3	2.25
7	Marl and siltstone	2.1	2.25
8	Sandstone	2.8	2.2
10	Serpentinite	2.5	2.8
11	Calceschyst	2.5	2.4
12	Limestone and dolostone	2.7	2.25
13	Fine grained gneiss	2.5	2.1
14	Coarse grained gneiss	2.9	2.1
15	Granite	3.2	2.5

234

235 The ground temperature is almost constant through the year and slightly higher than the annual mean air  
 236 temperature [30, 46], which is strongly correlated with the elevation (Fig. 2). A few data are available on  
 237 the subsurface temperature in the province of Cuneo, measured in a number of water wells in the plain  
 238 [31, 47], while no measures are available for the hilly and mountainous parts. An empirical correlation with  
 239 the ground elevation was therefore used, which was calibrated against ground temperature measured in  
 240 Switzerland [48]. The regional DTM of Piedmont was used as an input for ground elevations [49]. Ground  
 241 temperatures were not estimated above 1500 m a.s.l. where, according to Ref. [48], the correlation is not  
 242 valid since the snow cover alters the thermal exchange between the air and the ground. About 25% of the  
 243 total area of the province of Cuneo, but less than 1% of the total population, was therefore excluded from  
 244 the evaluation of the ground temperature and hence of the geothermal potential.

245 The map of the closed-loop geothermal potential is shown in Fig. 5**Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata**  
 246 **trovata..** This indicator varies from 5 to 12 MWh/y, depending on the thermal conductivity and the  
 247 temperature of the ground. In the central and northern part of the *Left Stura Bank* plain and in the *Tanaro*  
 248 *Valley*, the thermal conductivity is quite high ( $\lambda = 2 \div 2.3 Wm^{-1}K^{-1}$ ) due to the shallow water table, and  
 249 the ground temperature are the highest in the territory surveyed ( $T_0 = 12 \div 14^\circ C$ ). The highest  
 250 geothermal potentials ( $\bar{P}_{BHE} = 10 \div 12 MWh/y$ ) are therefore observed in this part of the plain, which  
 251 accounts for about 20% of the total area and 40% of the total population. The hills of Langhe and Roero and  
 252 the southern portion of the *Right Stura Bank* plain, which account for about 50% of the total population,  
 253 are slightly less suitable for BHEs ( $\bar{P}_{BHE} = 8 \div 10 MWh/y$ ) due to the lower thermal conductivity  
 254 ( $\lambda = 1.2 \div 2.1 Wm^{-1}K^{-1}$ ) and temperature ( $T_0 = 10 \div 12^\circ C$ ) of the ground. Less than 10% of the  
 255 population lives in areas with very low suitability for BHEs, where the geothermal potential falls to  
 256  $\bar{P}_{BHE} = 5 \div 8 MWh/y$ . The causes of such a low geothermal potential are different:



- in the valleys, the outcropping rocks are generally very conductive ( $\lambda > 2.5 \text{ Wm}^{-1}\text{K}^{-1}$ ) but the ground temperature is very low ( $T_0 = 7 \div 10^\circ\text{C}$ );
- in the SW of the *Left Stura Bank* (Cuneo, Caraglio, Busca and Centallo) the water table is very deep (up to 70 m from ground surface) and hence the thermal conductivity is very low ( $\lambda = 1 \div 1.5 \text{ Wm}^{-1}\text{K}^{-1}$ ). Borehole Thermal Energy Storage (BTES) can be installed here to take advantage of the poorly conductive ground, storing large quantities of heat during Summer with low heat losses [50].

### 3.2 Open-loop geothermal potential

While the design of closed-loop GSHPs is generally performed with standard sizing methods based on ground thermal parameters which can be derived from large-scale geological maps, GWHPs require a thorough hydrogeological characterization of the installation site. Indeed, the hydrodynamic properties of the aquifer are site-specific, may vary in large ranges over short distances and should therefore be evaluated with *in situ* tests. A spatially continuous map of the open-loop geothermal potential cannot be developed unless a high spatial resolution database is available, which is not the case. A point-wise evaluation was therefore performed. The maximum allowed flow rate was estimated for both extraction and injection. The minimum of these two values was then used to calculate the open-loop geothermal potential, i.e. the maximum thermal power that can be exchanged with the aquifer, if water is disposed into the same aquifer after the heat exchange, which is the most commonly adopted practice.

Missteart and Beeson (2000, [51]) defined the potential well yield as the maximum flow rate that can be extracted by a well respecting a low-level threshold called Deepest Advisable Pumping Water Level (DAPWL). The variation of the hydraulic head in the well is calculated with the equation of Cooper and Jacob (1946, [52]):

$$s_w(Q) = \frac{Q}{4\pi T} \cdot \log \left( 2.25 \frac{T t_{pump}}{S r_w^2} \right) + C Q^2$$

Eq. 6

where  $Q$  ( $\text{m}^3\text{s}^{-1}$ ) is the well flow rate,  $T$  ( $\text{m}^2\text{s}^{-1}$ ) is the transmissivity of the aquifer,  $t_{pump}$  (s) is the pumping time,  $r_w$  (m) is the well radius, and  $C$  ( $\text{s}^2\text{m}^{-5}$ ) is the coefficient of the quadratic term of the Rorabaugh equation.

The drawdown in the production well and the rise in the reinjection well are calculated without considering their mutual interference. This is a conservative assumption, since the drawdown induced by the extraction well partially compensates the level rise due to the injection well, and vice versa.

The maximum allowed abstracted ( $Q_{abs}$ ) and injected ( $Q_{inj}$ ) flow rates were calculated with Eq. 6 imposing, respectively, a maximum drawdown (Eq. 7) and a maximum level rise (Eq. 8).

$$s_w(Q_{abs}) = \alpha \cdot b$$

Eq. 7

$$s_w(Q_{inj}) = d - d_{min}$$

Eq. 8

where  $\alpha$  is a fraction of the saturated thickness ( $b$ ),  $d$  and  $d_{min}$  are respectively the initial and the minimum possible depth of water table from ground surface. A 50% reduction of the initial saturated thickness ( $\alpha = 0.5$ ), was set as suggested by Ref. [51], while a minimum water table depth  $d_{min} = 3m$  was imposed to provide a safety margin against groundwater flooding.

The values of transmissivity ( $T$ ) were drawn from a dataset of specific flow rates  $q_{sp}$  derived from 304 wells in the *Left* and *Right Stura Bank* [53], adopting the equivalence  $T = q_{sp}$  suggested by Refs. [54-56]. The storage coefficient was set to  $S = 0.2$ , i.e. the average value of the range ( $S = 0.1 \div 0.3$ ) provided for unconfined aquifers [54]. The well radius was set to  $r_w = 0.25m$  and the quadratic loss coefficient of the Rorabaugh equation was set to  $C = 1900s^2m^{-5}$ , i.e. the highest value for a non-deteriorated well [57]. The pumping time was set to  $t_{pump} = 200d$ , as suggested by Ref. [51].

The maximum allowed extracted/injected flow rates are used as input to calculate the open-loop geothermal potential according to two operating modes:

- without reinjection, thus avoiding possible groundwater flooding issues in the reinjection wells:

$$P_{GWHP,max,noinj} = Q_{abs} \cdot \rho_f c_f \cdot \Delta T$$

Eq. 9

- with reinjection, which is the most commonly adopted solution:

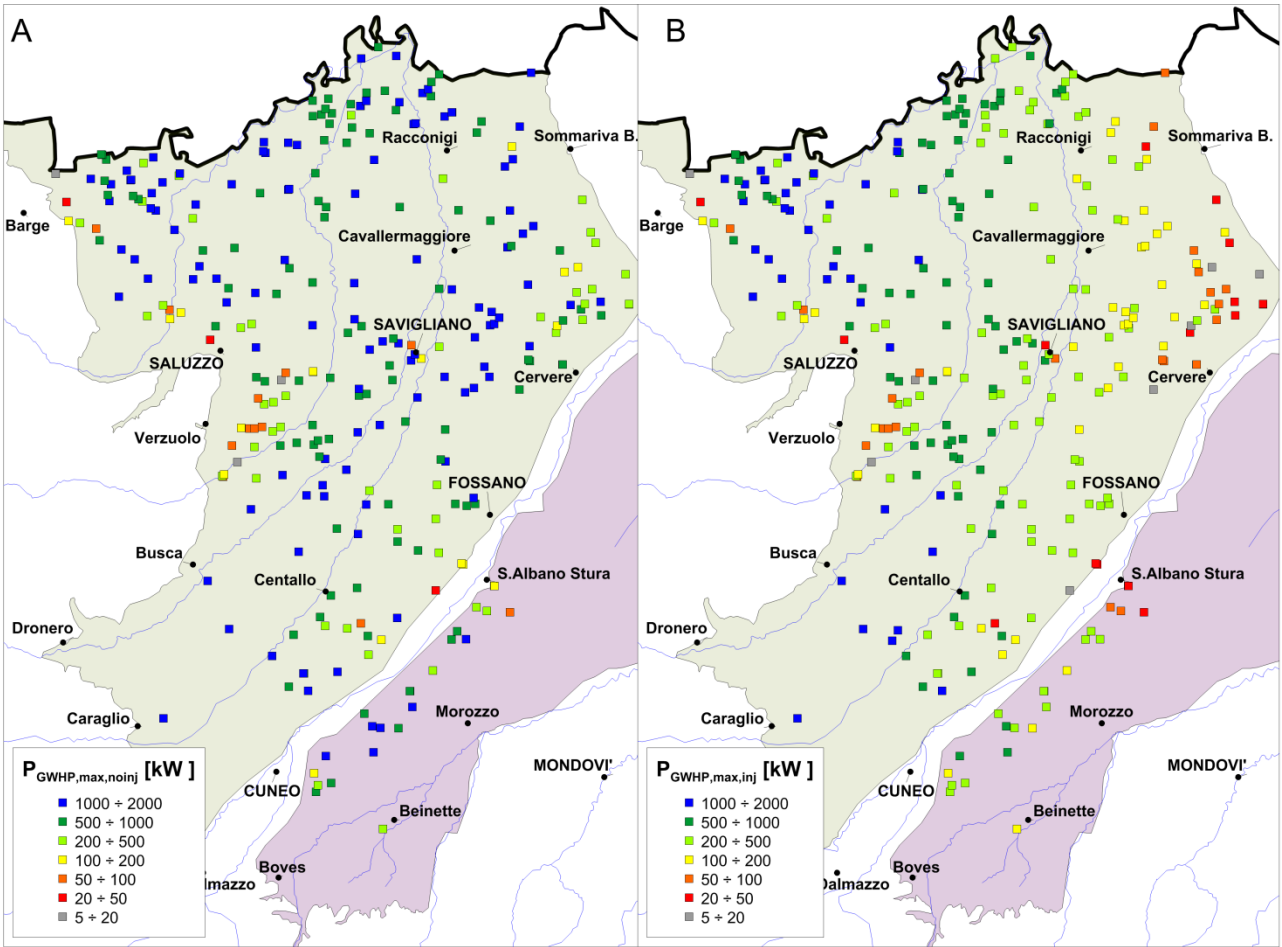
$$P_{GWHP,max,inj} = \min(Q_{abs}, Q_{inj}) \cdot \rho_f c_f \cdot \Delta T$$

Eq. 10

where  $\rho_f c_f = 4.2 \cdot 10^6 Jm^{-3}K^{-1}$  is the thermal capacity of water and  $\Delta T = 5K$  is the temperature difference between injection and abstraction well.

The maps of the open-loop geothermal potential with and without reinjection are reported in Fig. 6. Reinjection can be avoided if a surface water body (rivers, channels, lakes) is available close to the installation site. The open-loop geothermal potential in this case achieves values higher than 1000 kW in most of the *Left Stura Bank* plain, as shown in Fig. 6A, while lower values are observed on the western and eastern edges, due to the lower transmissivity of the aquifer (Fig. 4B). However, reinjection is usually required for GWHPs in Piedmont, in order to avoid additional consumptive uses of the aquifer, and hence the open-loop geothermal potential with reinjection was calculated ( $P_{GWHP,max,inj}$ , see Eq. 10). Reinjection proves a strong limiting factor for the installable thermal power of GWHPs, as shown in Fig. 6B, due to the low depth to water table of the northern and eastern sectors of the *Left Stura Bank*, and of most of the *Right Stura Bank* (Fig. 4A). A clear decreasing trend from west to east is therefore observed for open-loop

319 geothermal potential in the *Left Stura Bank* (Fig. 4B) due to the progressive reduction of the water table  
 320 depth and hence of the injectable flow rate. This issue can be overcome adopting multiple injection and  
 321 extraction wells, or other reinjection techniques such as ponds or trenches [58].  
 322 Groundwater chemistry is another important design issue for GWHPs. According to Rafferty (1999, [59]),  
 323 scale formation can occur in the thermal exchange circuit for water carbonate hardness higher than 10°F.  
 324 This threshold is usually not respected in the unconfined aquifer in the province of Cuneo, with most values  
 325 ranging between 20°F and 40°F [38, 60], and hence the use of secondary heat exchange circuit is strongly  
 326 advised.  
 327



328  
 329 **Fig. 6 – Map of the open-loop geothermal potential in the alluvial shallow aquifers of the province of Cuneo with water disposal**  
 330 **in surface water bodies (A) and in the same aquifer (B).**

## 331 **4 Conclusions**

332 Ground Source Heat Pump is an environmentally and economically viable technology for the heating and  
 333 cooling of buildings. It exploits a local RES such as the heat stored in shallow ground. This resource is  
 334 available everywhere, but the techno-economic feasibility depends on the site conditions, i.e. ground  
 335 thermal and/or hydrogeological parameters. In this work, the potential for the installation of closed-loop



336 and open-loop geothermal heat pumps was assessed in the province of Cuneo, NW Italy. The geology, the  
337 hydrogeology and the climate of this territory was studied by harmonizing and homogenizing data from  
338 different sources. Based on these data, relevant parameters for the operation of GSHPs were estimated. A  
339 mathematical method called G.POT [27] was used to estimate the closed-loop geothermal potential, i.e. the  
340 thermal power that can be exchanged by a BHE. The open-loop geothermal potential is defined as the  
341 maximum thermal power that can be exchanged by a GWHP composed of a well doublet. The thermal  
342 power is limited by hydraulic head alterations induced by groundwater extraction and injection, which  
343 depend on the hydrogeological properties of the aquifer.

344 According to the results, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- 345 - the province of Cuneo has a good potential for the installation of closed-loop BHEs, in particular in  
346 the central part of the plain, where about 40% of the population lives. In this area,  $10 \div 12$  MWh/y  
347 can be exchanged with a 100 m-long BHE. The geothermal potential diminishes to  $8 \div 10$  MWh/y in  
348 the hilly areas of the Langhe and Roero, in the alluvial aquifers at the bottom of the valleys and in  
349 the southern part of the alluvial plain of the *Right Stura Bank*, due to lower ground temperatures;
- 350 - less than 10% of the population lives in areas with a low suitability for the installation of BHEs,  
351 where the geothermal potential falls to  $\bar{P}_{BHE} = 5 \div 8$  MWh/y). In the south-western part of the  
352 plain (both *Left Stura Bank* and *Right Stura Bank*), this is due to the presence of a thick vadose zone  
353 (up to 70 m) and the consequently low thermal conductivity of the ground. On the other hand, such  
354 a thick unsaturated zone makes this area suitable for Borehole Thermal Energy Storage (BTES). The  
355 upper part of the Alpine valleys, characterized by a very low ground temperature, is also scarcely  
356 suitable for BHEs;
- 357 - a large part of the Province of Cuneo is occupied by alluvial aquifers with a high transmissivity,  
358 which makes them suitable for the installation of GWHPs. The main limiting factor is the low depth  
359 to water table, which is critical for water reinjection. This issue can be overcome by using  
360 reinjection techniques such as ponds, trenches, and gabions [58].

361 Maps of geothermal potential are valuable tools for the evaluation of the suitability for closed-loop and  
362 open-loop geothermal heat pumps. Closed-loop BHEs can be installed everywhere, hence the evaluation in  
363 this work focused on the efficiency of a possible installation, depending on site-specific ground thermal  
364 parameters. On the other hand, the installation of an open-loop GWHP is possible only in the presence of a  
365 sufficiently productive aquifer. For this reason, the evaluation focused on the sustainability of groundwater  
366 extraction and reinjection, which depends on the hydrodynamic properties of the aquifer, while the  
367 efficiency was not evaluated, since it depends on the characteristics of single geothermal systems.

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- 504
- 505
- 506

507 **6 List of acronyms**

ASHP	Air-Source Heat Pump	508
BHE	Borehole Heat Exchangers	
BP	Before Present	509
BTES	Borehole Thermal Energy Storage	
COP	Coefficient Of Performance	
DD	Degree-Days	
DTM	Digital Terrain Model	
EU	European Union	
G.POT	Geothermal POTential	
GSHP	Ground Source Heat Pump	
GWHP	Ground Water Heat Pump	
RES	Renewable Energy Source	

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511

## 512 7 List of symbols

### 513 7.1 Latin letters

Symbol	Unit	Description
$b$	m	Saturated thickness of the aquifer
$d$	m	Depth of the aquifer's water table (depth to water table)
$d_{min}$	m	Minimum allowed depth to water table
$G_{max}(u'_s, u'_c, t'_c)$	-	Non-dimensional function of the maximum thermal alteration of the ground at the borehole wall
$L$	m	Depth of the borehole heat exchanger
$n$	-	Number of pipes
$\bar{P}_{BHE}$	MWh/y	Closed-loop geothermal potential
$P_{GWHP,max,inj}$	kW	Open-loop geothermal potential with water reinjection into the same aquifer
$P_{GWHP,max,noinj}$	kW	Open-loop geothermal potential without water reinjection
$Q$	$m^3s^{-1}$	Well flow rate
$Q_{abs}$	$m^3s^{-1}$	Maximum allowed abstraction flow rate
$Q_{inj}$	$m^3s^{-1}$	Maximum allowed injection flow rate
$q_{sp}$	$m^2s^{-1}$	Specific flow rate
$r_b$	m	Radius of the borehole
$R_b$	$mKW^{-1}$	Borehole thermal resistance
$r_p$	m	Radius of the pipes of the borehole heat exchanger
$r_w$	m	Well radius
$S$	-	Aquifer's storage coefficient
$s_w$	m	Level displacement in the well
$T_0$	K	Undisturbed ground temperature
$t_c$	s	Length of the heating season
$t'_c$	-	Non-dimensional length of the heating season
$T$	$m^2s^{-1}$	Aquifer's transmissivity
$T_{lim}$	K	Minimum or maximum threshold temperature of the heat carrier fluid
$T_{mth}$	°C	Monthly average air temperature
$t_s$	s	Simulated operation time
$t_y$	s	Length of the year
$T_{yr}$	°C	Yearly average air temperature
$u'_c$	-	Non-dimensional cycle time parameter
$u'_s$	-	Non-dimensional simulation time parameter

### 514 7.2 Greek letters

Symbol	Unit	Description
$\alpha$	-	Maximum allowed reduction of the saturated thickness
$\Delta T$	K	Temperature difference between abstraction and injection well
$\lambda$	$Wm^{-1}K^{-1}$	Thermal conductivity of the ground
$\lambda_{bf}$	$Wm^{-1}K^{-1}$	Thermal conductivity of the borehole filling (grout)
$\rho c$	$Jm^{-3}K^{-1}$	Thermal capacity of the ground
$\rho_f c_f$	$Jm^{-3}K^{-1}$	Thermal capacity of water

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